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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [EAGR](#) [EINV](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: Land and Corruption Blamed for Gurao Riots

REFERENCE: A: Guangzhou 398; B) Guangzhou 353; C) Guangzhou 06
32440; D) 06 Guangzhou 32264; E) 06 Guangzhou 11684; F) 06 Guangzhou
2194; G) 05 Guangzhou 32000; H) 05 Guangzhou 31940; I) 04 Guangzhou
37430

(U) This document is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect
accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Riots over land sales and disputes over ownership
in Gurao Town, in east Guangdong in early May underline again the
fragile state of the social compact in the rapidly changing,
oft-times corrupt south China environment. Local angry farmers in
more than a dozen villages reportedly attacked and looted the houses
of local village officials, who they blamed for illegally selling
village farmland and pocketing the proceeds. According to local
press, police were instructed not to take strong action in handling
the riots for the sake of maintaining "social harmony." End
summary.

¶2. (SBU) Gurao Town is one of China's major underwear manufacturing
bases, and has about 400 textile factories and 1,000 workshops. It
is northwest of downtown Shantou. Congenoff visited the town in
2004 (ref I) and was impressed by its prosperity i.e., as an island
of wealth standing alone amid an ocean of poor villages. Commenting
on the riots, Hong Kong's Ming Pao said officials in local villages
often undersell local farmland to enterprises and pocket all or part
of the money.

Village Officials' Houses Looted and Damaged

¶3. (SBU) According to a May 8 Ming Pao article, residents of several
villages in Gurao gathered at the homes of local officials homes
during China's May holidays to seek an explanation for recent land
sales. The situation soon escalated, with the farmers allegedly
removing valuables from the homes and damaging property. The wife
of a former village chief told Ming Pao that her house was plundered
by about 100 villagers on May 2; another village official claimed to
have been harassed by farmers who broke into his house at midnight.
Many village officials fled their homes, according to the news
reports. Official from Daken and Daheng villages also reported
attacks, but no casualties.

Organization of Villagers

¶4. (SBU) Media reports imply that the riots were organized. Ming
Pao said that there was a "Land Maintenance Group" in Gurao which
encouraged villagers to take actions against corrupt local

officials. Members of the group handed out printed notices to people with the slogan "Do not wrong a single good person, but spare no bad one." A journalist reportedly witnessed several farmers on bicycles in Gurao's town center on May 8 calling for villagers to participate in reporting corruption. In some villages, people reportedly used gongs to guide villagers to official's homes to loot and damage.

Little Action by Local Police

15. (SBU) Media reports say the police have taken little action to stop the riots. Zhang Yingyong, a township official in Gurao, told reporters that he and his staff were surrounded by several hundred people in a local village and prevented them from leaving. Police arrived and dispersed the villagers but did not take further action, likely to prevent further exacerbating a volatile situation.

The local district and township governments also sent working groups to begin a dialogue with disaffected villagers. Many officials were verbally abused by villagers and both sides assaulted one another physically.

Comment

16. (SBU) Following the Dongzhou incident in 2005 (reftels B, G, H), after which local officials and police were disciplined, local governments have been more cautious in handling social unrest, especially where it affects issues of land and eminent domain. The upcoming annual session of the Guangdong CPC, which will be held May 18, may be another reason the government has not escalated the situation. The scale and duration of the riots over several days

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indicate the likelihood of serious land corruption in the area. Local villagers are becoming more socially aware and organized in defending their interests, though we do not know whether they had outside assistance such as occurred earlier with the rights protection movement here. Villagers may now believe that some level of violence and looting is the only way to convey their anger against local officials accused of corruption, but whether these actions ultimately rebound against them remains to be seen.

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